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ABSTRACT

The crucial variable in good classroom teaching is the verbal behavior of the teacher. Through his questioning techniques--what questions he asks, how and when he asks them, how he replies to students, and how he stimulates students to reply to each other--the teacher can evoke a high level of class discussion and force students to go beyond the factual level of comprehension. To improve his questioning techniques, the teacher should (1) call on the less demonstrative students, unobtrusively correcting misinformation so that all in the class experience some degree of success, (2) sequence and pace questions carefully, (3) avoid using questions which deal with insignificant content or which require fact-recall, opinion, and "either-or" responses, (4) adapt questions to the particular subject areas under discussion, and (5) in teaching literature, use such questions as "Why?" "Under what circumstances...?" "How can you tell that...?" "How would you compare...?" "What are the probable causes or possible effects of...?" and "What would happen if...?" (JB)

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Are There Any Questions?

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Asking the right questions is a complex skill. A review of a few underlying principles can be useful for experienced teachers as well as for novices.

"Are there any questions?" How many times had we as high school students heard this remark? And yet, in a few instances it was not a request to ask questions so much as an admonition to acquiesce and be silent. Ironically, a question served to stifle thought.

But teaching and learning presuppose the use of questions. Regardless of educational philosophy, the heart of good teaching lies in asking good questions, and whether the teacher assumes the mantle of the lecturer or of the ambulatory advice-giver, he must know how to ask good questions and when to ask them.

In recent years there has been a good deal of attention focussed on the kinds of questions teachers ask. In particular, educationists have shown interest in the mental operations that various kinds of questions elicit. As a result several books based in part on the Bloom Taxonomy have been widely used in teacher-training institutions. In this paper I will not review the taxonomy; rather I shall make some very general observations about questioning as well as discuss questioning strategies in the teaching of literature.

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The verbal behavior of the classroom teacher is probably the most crucial factor in determining how involved students will become in a class discussion. And it is principally the teacher's questioning technique which affects the degree of student involvement. What questions he asks, how and when he asks them, how he replies to students, how he stimulates students to talk to each other—these are the crucial factors governing the success or failure of a class discussion.

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Early Weaknesses

The ability to ask good questions is not a matter of one's having the right genes, and all beginning teachers must strive to improve their questioning technique. The problems of unexperienced teachers vary. During their initial teaching experience many instructors fail to achieve a satisfactory pattern of classroom interaction. These neophyte teachers invariably call upon the student who seems to know the answer, and in the process they completely ignore several of the less demonstrative or knowledgeable members of the class. Many beginning teachers also fail to allow the student to experience success—even when there appears a faint possibility to reward him. These teachers seem to view answers as categorically right or wrong and fail to perceive the degree of rightness in a *wrong* answer. Moreover, they may fail to see that the *wrong* answer may actually be a right one, only one they hadn't expected. Some inexperienced teachers also over-rely upon fact-recall questions. As a result, they frequently give a superficial treatment to the subject matter studied. Moreover, by employing a rapid-fire interchange of dialogue with students, they stimulate neither thought nor discussion. And since they talk more than half the time, they cause a disastrous drop in student interest.

Questioning Strategies

A teacher can employ several simple strategies to encourage student involvement and learning:

1. To involve all students in class discussion, the teacher, if necessary, should list the names of students he tends to ignore and make an especial effort to involve these students in further discussion.
2. To encourage the reticent and shy student to participate in discussion, the teacher should ask "low risk" questions. He should ask questions which pose little threat to the student's self-image, questions which require either simple fact-recall or opinion.

3. To generate greater interaction among students and to reduce proportionately the amount of teacher-talk, the teacher, conscious of the interaction patterns in his class, should employ a greater percentage of open-ended and/or thought-provoking questions.
4. To avoid unnecessary repetition, the teacher should sequence questions carefully.
5. To increase participation in class discussion, the teacher should employ appropriate reinforcement. Verbal rewards should be specific. Responses like "Okay" and "Alright" should be avoided if they are said out of habit and are therefore meaningless. If an answer is partially correct, the teacher should emphasize the positive; in such situations the teacher should reward the student and unobtrusively correct misinformation.
6. To increase student learning, the teacher should encourage students to evaluate the responses of classmates. He should avoid the role of infallible expert and should give students the responsibility of constructively criticising the responses of peers. By thrusting this responsibility upon his students, he forces them to become both critics and respondents. Thus his students, communicating with increasingly greater insight, learn proportionately more.

Questions About Literature

While these suggestions to improve questioning technique apply to most academic subjects, certain questioning strategies seem peculiar to certain subject areas. The following gambits can be employed by the teacher of literature to avoid certain pitfalls in questioning.

In teaching literature several types of questions hinder rather than facilitate class discussion. One of the worst types is that which elicits the simple no/yes answer. If the teacher asks a factual question like "In *The Ransom of Red Chief* did the father desire the release of his son?" and the student answers "No," one question naturally follows. Generally, the offending *no/yes* question will appear in a sequence followed by the question *why:* "In *Light in the Forest* did True Son really follow Cuyloga's advice?" "No." "Why?" The sequence is a poor one since it engages the attention of a single student but does not allow him time to think about the matter or to organize his thoughts.

A better procedure is to preface the question with a statement weighing the possibilities: "There's some question whether True Son really followed Cuyloga's advice. On what basis would you agree or disagree?" With this question directed at the class rather than at a single student and with sufficient time for the class to think about the question, it would provide greater student interaction than the *no/yes-why* sequence.

Another inappropriate question is the *don't-you-think-that* question: "Don't you really think that Antony is being ironic when he calls Brutus an honourable man?" In effect, the teacher by virtue of his position, age and greater knowledge, is asking for assent. When he employs this type of question, he is really telling his students rather than letting his students discover. This type of question tends to stifle discussion because the teacher acts as an answering service, and the student who has the *don't-you-think-that* directed toward him (with the implication that he is wrong) will in the future be a little more hesitant to make his thoughts known.

Another inappropriate question involves the student's reaction to the literary selection. Generally, the *did-you-like* question places the student in an embarrassing position. If he likes the selection (and thereby agrees with the teacher), the class may regard him as sycophantic; if he passionately states he despised the selection the teacher may regard him as obstreperous.

A more satisfactory approach involves the comparison of two literary selections. By having the student discuss why he likes a particular selection better than another, the teacher makes the student introspect about his

reading but avoids the problems inherent in the *did-you-like* question. By changing the nature of the question, the teacher allows his class to be more open and honest about their reactions to literature.

A type of question to be used with caution is the polar question: "In *The Valiant* why or why not was James Dyke really courageous in not revealing his identity?" If passions are aroused, a high level of discussion will ensue. However, if emotions are not aroused, students will generally slip through the horns of dilemma, the discussion will be fatuous and the teacher will look foolish. Another short-coming of this type of question is that it encourages either-or thinking. Frequently a teacher in his desire for controversy may make the question appear as if only two choices can be made when actually three or more alternatives are available.

For the most effective presentation the polarity of such questions should not be immediately apparent and they should be phrased in either positive or negative terms, much like the proposition in a formal debate. For example, the previous question might be reworded, "Why was James Dyke courageous . . .?" (One caution: To employ this kind of question successfully, the teacher must show that he is not infallible and that he brooks dissent; in fact, that he even encourages it.) By phrasing the question positively or negatively, the teacher forces students to take a particular position on an issue. But in taking a position, they will either challenge the teacher or, having sided with the teacher, may be challenged by classmates. As a consequence, the thrust of the discussion appears to come from members of the class, not from the teacher.

Good Questions

Let us now turn our attention to the kinds of questions that should be employed, the questions that stimulate both thought and class discussion. Although this list is far from inclusive, the following represent some types of questions appropriate for the teaching of English:

Under what circumstances . . .?
How can you tell . . .?
What is significant about . . .?
Why . . .?
What evidence can you find . . .?
How would you summarize . . .?
What are the probable causes of . .?
What are the possible effects of . . .?
How would you compare . . .?
What would happen if . . .?

All of the above questions elicit some form of abstract thinking; that is, they require the student to go beyond the factual level of comprehension and force him to generalize, classify, or relate specific concepts into some meaningful pattern. For example, the question *Why . . . ?* can force the student to perceive relationships which may exist among specified details, characters, or plot incidents. Moreover, it can force him to make inferences about theme, character motivation, and the reason why certain incidents are included in this plot. Such questions as *what are the possible effects of . . .?* force the student to draw conclusion based upon his own experience and an understanding of the implications and facts he has read. Questions like *How would you summarize . . . ?* force students to sense the continuity and sequence in plots and argumentation. And questions like *How would you compare . . . ?* if asked in reference to two or more literary works, force the student to evaluate the worth of a literary selection by requiring him to compare or contrast it with others.

Although the above questions require abstract thought, several go beyond this level and demand answers which are creative in nature; that is, the questions force students to reorder concepts into novel patterns. For example, the question *What would happen if . . . ?* gives the pupil freedom to explore all the ramifications of a problem such as what

possible results, limitations or advantages obtain in altering the original situation. Unfortunately, in most classrooms not enough questions have been directed toward eliciting creative responses from students. Many teachers simply have been loath to ask such open-ended questions, since the responses they elicit are not comfortingly right or wrong.

Moderation Needed

The preceding list also raises several problems concerning questioning techniques. If all these types of questions were used during a single lesson, a variety of mental operations would unquestionably be performed and a great deal of discussion would probably be generated. However, at the end of the lesson, during which penetrating questions have been asked relentlessly, students would probably be enervated, having suffered from a surfeit of thought questions. Discussing literature should not bring about fatigue or anxiety, and the teacher should remember that thought questions, like any stimulant, should be used only in moderation.

A second problem must also be faced. The following thought question based on the above list could conceivably be developed: What is significant about the relationship between Jack and Jill? What might have happened if Jack and Jill did not go up the hill? Under what circumstances would you have gone up the hill? Why did they fetch a pail of water? What are the possible causes of Jack's fall? What motivated Jill to tumble after? and so on. The point is, thought questions which involve various mental operations are of little value if the content is not worthy of study.

In the final analysis, the verbal behavior of the teacher is probably the most important classroom variable affecting student learning. Through his questioning technique he stimulates class discussion and establishes a dialogue among students. And through his judicious selection of questions he forces students not only to perform a variety of mental operations, but also to struggle with subject matter that is significant. In short, through his questions he teaches. ●